

# ACHESON, PRESENT AT THE CREATION, NOW REPORTS

**Donald Brandon**

Dean Acheson, President Truman's Secretary of State from 1949-1953, is generally considered to have been one of the ablest men to have held that position in the twentieth century. His memoirs recall the qualities of mind and the at times testy temperament which, together with the role he played in great events, made him also a very controversial Secretary. He did not suffer fools gladly, and was at times impatient and tactless with lesser mortals who failed to grasp what he considered to be elementary truths of world affairs. Although he has mellowed somewhat, he still believes that he was correct on all the great decisions in which he had his way, and the memoirs do not include a single significant case in which he acknowledges having been wrong.

*Present at the Creation*, by Dean Acheson.  
Norton. 798 pp. \$12.50.

In an *Apologia*, Acheson says that he decided to write these memoirs after initially rejecting requests that he do so. He changed his mind because: "The experiences of the years since I wrote have brought the country, and particularly its young people, to a mood of depression, disillusion, and withdrawal from the effort to affect the world around us. Today detachment and objectivity seem to me less important than to tell a tale of large conceptions, great achievements, and some failures, the product of enormous will and effort. Its hero is the American people, led by two men of rare quality, President Truman and General Marshall, served by lieutenants of whom I had the great good fortune to be one." America confronted an enormous task in 1945, a task which "only slowly revealed itself. As it did so, it began to appear as just a bit less formidable than that described in the first chapter of Genesis. That was to create a world out of chaos; ours, to create half a world, a free half, out of the same material without blowing the whole

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to pieces in the process. The wonder of it is how much was done."

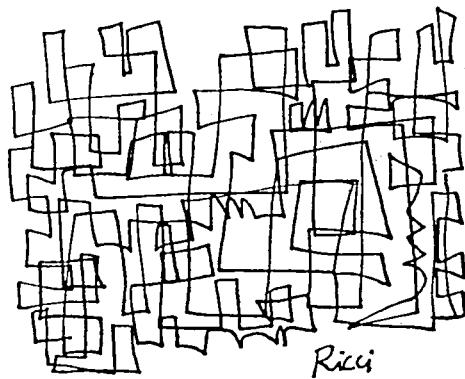
The first section of the book covers Acheson's years as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs during the second world war. Among the most interesting and "relevant" parts of this section are Acheson's description of American attitudes toward the outside world and his remarks about the "old" State Department. "The nature of the world around us in 1941 was one thing; American notions about it were quite another," Acheson recalls. "Two contrary and equally unrealistic ideas about it competed for the national mind. . . ." The first was isolationism, the second "the dream of universal law and internationally enforced peace, embodied and embalmed in the League of Nations and resurrected in the United Nations." Thirty years later, one cannot help pointing out, these two still "equally unrealistic ideas" with some variations are again competing for the nation's allegiance. Acheson's description of the personality, simplistic outlook, and limited role of Secretary Hull and of the State Department add spice and "I-was-there" commentary to an already well-known story.

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Acheson's discussion of various topics during the period 1941-1945 indicate that he was largely caught up in the euphoria of great expectations regarding the postwar world. He was Under Secretary of State from 1945-1947, and, like most men in Washington, he was educated by events and reluctantly faced up to the Soviet challenge which ushered in the Cold War hard on the heels of America's Second Crusade. He credits George Kennan for an understanding of Stalin's outlook and intentions at a time when most American leaders were extremely naive. At the same time, Acheson criticizes Kennan's inadequate understanding of power in world affairs: "His [Kennan's] recommendations—to be of good heart, to look to our own social and economic health, to present a good face to the world, all of which the Government was trying to do—were of no help; his historical analysis might or might not have been sound, but his predictions and warnings could not have been better. We responded to them slowly." Acheson and Kennan have

engaged in many debates on specific policy questions during the last quarter century which reflect their differing views of international realities.

Acheson naturally and rightly lauds the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and NATO. Most students would agree that the Truman Administration was magnificent in responding to the postwar situation in Europe and in the Mediterranean. But Acheson generally defends that Administration's role in China and in the Korean War as well as in the West. This is not to say that the China tangle could have been handled easily, or that the victory of Mao could have been avoided by a different American policy after the war. Acheson says when General Marshall undertook his mission in 1946 to try to work out a coalition between Mao and Chiang, the Truman Administration didn't really understand it was "seeking the reconciliation of irreconcilable factions. The people's democracy of Mao would not willingly accept the dominance of Chiang Kai-shek nor a democratic China friendly to the United States, while the Nationalist Government could not impose its dominance on the Communists without the military intervention of the United States (if it could even with it) due to the ineptitude of the Kuomintang." But he asserts, "That the policy adopted is now seen to have been doomed carries no implication that any other would not have been equally doomed. Hindsight does not carry comfort, like a St. Bernard to an exhausted traveler."



Acheson also discusses the widespread distortion of his phrase, "let the dust settle," in connection with U.S. policy after the failure of Marshall's mission, and the open resumption of civil war between Mao and Chiang. He rightly points out that America did not just sit on the sidelines. He argues that the China White Paper published by the Government in 1949 "still stands up well as a fair, accurate, and scholarly presentation of the facts" after twenty years. He quotes from the conclusion of that document: "The unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the con-

trol of the Government of the United States. Nothing that this country did or could have done within the reasonable limits of its capabilities could have changed that result; nothing that was left undone by this country has contributed to it." This, like the statement that a different course of action at the time of the Marshall mission may have been "equally doomed," is going too far. It is too much to assert flatly, as Acheson does, that this country's policy had "nothing" to do with the result. American policy toward China during and after World War II was shot through with misconceptions and wishful thinking. Tang Tsou's *America's Failure in China, 1941-1950*, is a more balanced and scholarly account than that contained in the White Paper.

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One can agree with Acheson's criticism of the personality, methods, and policy recommendations of General MacArthur following Chinese entry into the Korean War. But it is difficult to understand Acheson's denial that his own famous speech several months before that conflict defining America's defense perimeter (excluding South Korea) had anything to do with the North Korean attack. Acheson quotes a speech of General MacArthur which contained the same ideas on this country's commitments in East Asia. But this only proves that they both erred in this matter. Acheson, and perhaps MacArthur as well, may have had in the back of his mind the notion that America would have to respond to a Communist aggressive move in Korea, but Stalin, Mao, and the North Koreans could not be blamed for being unaware of that. Acheson also fails to criticize the American move beyond the 38th parallel and advance toward the Chinese border as an error. In short, on Korea as on China, Acheson does not admit that any major mistakes by the Truman Administration contributed in any way to those disasters. In this respect, Acheson's memoirs are like most of that genre: they are in part self-serving, and must be handled with care.

In an Epilogue, Acheson describes in a paragraph the achievements of the Truman Administration on the world stage:

When the Truman government found its footing in foreign affairs, its policies showed a sweep, a breadth of conception and boldness of action both new in this country's history and obviously centrally planned and directed. We had seen it in the early domestic policies of the New Deal and in our vast military effort in the 1941-45 war, but not before in foreign policy. The 1947 assumption of responsibility in the eastern Mediterranean, the 1948 grand-

eur of the Marshall Plan, the response to the blockade of Berlin, the NATO defense of Europe in 1949, and the intervention in Korea in 1950—all those constituted expanding action in truly heroic mold. All of them were dangerous. All of them required rare capacity to decide and act. All of them were decided rightly, and vigorously followed through.

I think this is very close to the truth, and laud Acheson for telling his tale, which needs to be more widely known and understood by America's young people today. This country was a reluctant belligerent in World War II, and it also reluctantly but decisively accepted the challenge of free world leadership in the aftermath of that conflagration.

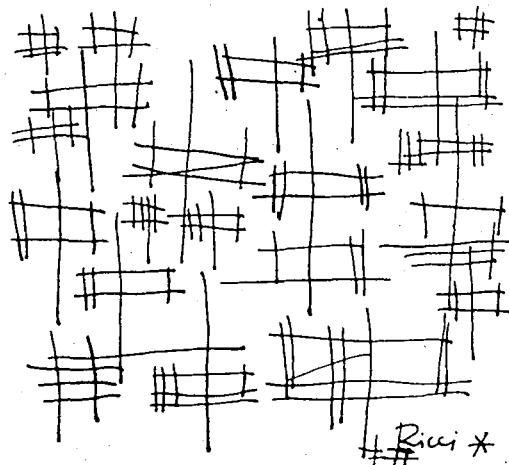
Dean Acheson has always seen struggle and rivalry among nations at the heart of international relations. He once said in a speech, ". . . the first duty of a society is to survive. It isn't to make the world safe for democracy, or to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It is to survive. That's the No. 1 necessity." Acheson was never very popular with the League of Women Voters *et al.* He consistently stressed the need for power, including military power, while at the same time rejecting fatalistic notions of the inevitability of nuclear Armageddon. In his memoirs, he writes:

Intellectuals were quick and correct in pointing out that ultimate reality in foreign affairs was not found in terms of power alone. They were not always so quick to see that neither was it to be found in moral or political principles alone. . . . Out of our past came the admonition to "put your faith in God and keep your powder dry." Today we phrased it, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" Even beyond this recognition of compatibility between moral purpose and physical power lay a deeper truth. As Reinhold Niebuhr had said, "There is always an element of moral ambiguity in historic responsibilities," and as he had added, "Our survival as a civilization depends upon our ability to do what seems right from day to day without . . . alternate moments of illusion and despair."

Acheson is a political realist in the old Niebuhr tradition, hostile to "legalistic-moralistic" utopianism. He has a sure grasp of power politics, but too little interest in development politics, not to speak of schemes for transcending the anarchy of world affairs.

At the end of his story, Acheson recalls some remarks he made to colleagues upon leaving Washington after Eisenhower's inauguration in 1953. He suggested that the Republicans would soon come to appreciate the difficulties and complexities of foreign policy, despite their campaign rhetoric simplifications.

He is well aware that Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson all hoped to be peacemakers, and specifically to end or at least to dampen down significantly the Cold War. Now the Republicans are once again in power, and President Nixon has begun with the same noble urge. Acheson has commented in terms similar to those used by Max Frankel in the latter's recent essay in the *New York Times*. Frankel wrote regarding Nixon's approach: "the strident anti-communism of the past has been buried beneath the simple but vague slogan that the superpowers have moved from the 'era of confrontation into the era of negotiation,' as if they have not negotiated in the past and will not go on confronting each other indefinitely." One can easily imagine how Acheson must



have reacted to Nixon's State of the Union remark that his Administration's "new policies have contributed to the prospect that America may have the best chance since World War II to enjoy a generation of uninterrupted peace." Without vigilance, struggle, power, persistence, and any sacrifice at all? President Truman, General Marshall, Dean Acheson, and others set the course of recent American foreign policy in the disillusioning aftermath of the second world war. A new generation has grown up which neither knows the story, nor is conspicuous by its awareness of the realities of power in foreign affairs. Surely they should be told what they need, not what they devoutly wish to hear. They could do far worse than to read Acheson's memoirs for a sober, if somewhat too hard-headed introduction to the immediate background of today's world politics.